

SPONSORS FOR KNOWLEDGE*

BY G. W. LEE†

People are busy, and they are impatient of the recurring questions whose answers they feel ought to have been established. "Which is the best picnic ground within a five-cent ride of the city?" asks the settlement worker. "Where can we camp for the summer with a hotel nearby for our meals?" asks the fresh-air seeker. "Which is the best gas stove?" asks the householder. "Where shall we send our boy to college?" ask the parents. "Are these genuine mark-downs?" asks the shopper. "Does this subscription set altogether supersede my present one?" asks the prospective book-buyer. "How does the three-cent fare work in Cleveland?" asks the street railway man. "Does it pay to employ an efficiency expert?" asks the manufacturer.

Such everyday questions by everyday people present many a vexing problem. They are often too easily answered, or else considered unanswerable. They are typical of what ought to be answered far more satisfactorily than is usually the case; and, for my part, I believe the time is at hand when a systematic method of getting, through specialists, answers on topics of every description should be in operation. Would not the questioner hail such a system with delight? Would not the settlement worker like a better suggestion for a picnic ground than the well-known suburban park? and the fresh-air seeker a better reference source than a vacation railway folder? and the householder more of a guaranty than the assertion of a neighbor that the A B C gas stove is a delight? Would not the parents like something less bewildering than a dozen different suggestions from a dozen advisers as to the best college? and the shopper something more direct than that the mark-downs of another store are always genuine? and the book buyer something more convincing than the agent's pointing to a few passages in the new work that supersede the old? Would not the street railway man like to escape contradictions as to the three-cent experiment—a "grand success," according to some "a grand failure," according to as many others? And would not the manufacturer like to know for a certainty who is the doctor of all business doctors?

Many questions like these are usually answered in an off-

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hand, inaccurate way, in which the phrase "I guess" is too apt to be conclusive. The situation is unsatisfactory. We need to progress, we need to be scientific, and I cite the two following instances that suggest an obvious way to a better means of getting at facts:

A man whom I know likes to put such a gentle question as this: "Have you perchance any references on the ventilation of schoolhouses?" His very manner instigates a keen desire to produce a fine answer. His question seems easy, and you go to likely indexes and you write to likely specialists; and when you have spent as much time as you feel the circumstances warrant, you are disappointed not to have a long list of references to give him. You have, perhaps, a dozen. He thanks you cordially for these, and then gives you some consolation by saying that you have found about everything there is (of any consequence), adding that the big favor you have done is to make him surer than ever that he already had substantially all the light available to date upon the subject. If you feel interested to inquire how he knew the situation so well, he reveals to you that he is past president of a society which has specialized on the ventilation of schoolhouses; and to finish the episode he hands you a pamphlet written by himself, which you subsequently learn is a little more advanced in facts worth while than anything your library and correspondence research had produced.

There is another man I know who asks a question like this: "Have you made any compilation of the powers and scope of public service commissions?" I reply that I have started such compilation, as have plenty of others, but have yet to see it in complete and handy form. I tell him I hope he will do it in the way it ought to be done, and that thereafter some organization whose aim is professedly to do such things, will continue the good work by maintaining it always to date. He seems ready to put it through, as he needs the information for an address he is soon to make. As we are thus conversing up steps a representative of a department of the Government, and immediately I say to this representative that his is the very department which most fittingly could make the compilation in question. And I leave them talking together, hoping that they agree with me. Whether or no, the man with the latest word on ventilation and the man collecting and collating the facts about public service commissions, are by their very nature what

I should term "sponsors for knowledge." A sponsor (according to Webster) is "one who binds himself to answer for another's default;" and these two men are of the sort that become morally bound to make good many an undertaking which has been slighted by another.

Who is there that would bind himself to give satisfaction, when other sources fail, as to picnic grounds, or summer camps, or gas stoves, or colleges, or mark-downs, or subscription books, or three-cent fares, or efficiency experts—not by an oath, but by a gentleman's agreement? It might be difficult to find men who both would and to advantage could fill these positions. Doubtless such a sponsorship system must evolve from modest beginnings. Evolution does not proceed by turning out finished products; rather, by tendencies towards what is needed, with here and there abrupt variations (so called) that are more fitting than what has prevailed. Should we organize an information system with the man who is in the forefront on schoolhouse ventilation and with that other man who is preparing to make a study of public service commissions;—should we organize with these two individuals responsible for just two topics (out of a possible million) — we should have the nucleus of what people are unwittingly after. And once such a nucleus, the growth of the system would be a matter of business management.

Publicity concerning a few sponsors for interesting and important topics would bring to light many a candidate and many a specialty; and when the public realized there was an organized "where-to-look" on questions hitherto vaguely disposed of, it would turn to the same organization for much else. The upbuilding would be largely that of supply answering demand. Many a local undertaking would become the cog of a national wheel; we should have union lists of periodicals henceforth compiled on a national scale; overlapping indexes and bibliographical work henceforth arranged for so as to avoid duplication; book reviewing and evaluating done by experts in every department; rare books located in a central index for the country over; we should have a listing at headquarters, with quite likely a correspondence auction (such as is already conducted monthly on a small scale in Boston), of over-supplies and locally-not-needed literature, thus affording an efficient clearance system of what people have to dispose of and what they wish to obtain; and incidentally there would be a standardizing of forms and sizes in stationery and print.

"What are the signs that make you think that these things are soon coming to pass?" it may well be asked. Part of my justification I find printed in the advance papers of the library convention that took place in Washington the last of May and beginning of June. Note the following from "Special Libraries" for June:

One (in writing of "The Public Affairs Information Service") says: "No single library is adequately equipped to cover more than a small part of the sources of information concerning the multitude of questions with which it deals. . . . The information needed lies in thousands of scattered unindexed sources. It must be found, compiled, digested and put in form to serve its purpose. No sooner is it prepared than the march of progress renders it inadequate. It is beyond the power of a single library to keep up to date without the co-operation of others working along similar lines. The mere following of printed materials which each library ought to follow is beyond the power of most libraries. Hence the need of co-operation, in order that the work of each may be available to all and that all working together may advance the boundaries of organized information and knowledge. If one library is working on the regulation of dance halls, another on blue sky laws, another on the smoke nuisance, it is the part of wisdom of other libraries to avail themselves of the work already done by them. There is enough work for each without having several libraries do the same work indifferently well or without co-operation."

Another (writing of "The Special Library and Public Efficiency") says: "The library of yesterday . . . took as its province all knowledge, provided that knowledge was embalmed in old and bound books. The physical book was a precious thing; it was carefully stored away, to be taken from its place only by the librarian himself—rare old soul. . . . The library was an instrument of the aristocracy of learning. It was, as has well been said, for the learned rather than for the learner. It contained accidentally, if at all, a record of man's contemporary life, his achievements, his experiments, his aspirations. Browning recognizes this when he says:

'Men have lived among their books to die
Case-hardened in their ignorance.'

. . . It is not books or printed matter that the special librarian wants. It is information, and the information is secondary, or better, instrumental. The primary thing is the satisfaction

of the need or the curiosity of its constituency. . . John Cotton Dana has said recently: 'You don't know all that is to be known about your business. The combined knowledge of all the other men in the world who are in the same business, or something like it, is much greater than your knowledge, unless you know it all; and the only man who knew it all failed last year and is now digging post holes. This large sum of knowledge, in the possession of other men who are in the same business as yours, is somewhere all in print, or will be very soon. You could use it to advantage if you had it, and you can get it.' . . . The aim of the Socialists should be followed by other organizations, especially modern society: to put every member . . . and whatever contribution he has to offer into the service of all the rest; and to put all the knowledge and power of the whole party at the service of the one who needs it when the hour of need arrives."

A third (writing of "Intercommunication: National and International") says: "The next step, obviously, is to bring about the organization of an international federation for intercommunication. . . The usefulness of such an organization with proper facilities throughout the world is too easily perceived to require much comment. It would afford excellent opportunities to students, investigators, librarians, collectors, and others to secure directly the information or objects desired. The correspondence club idea is not new. Many such organizations exist in Europe and elsewhere. . . Some of these existing agencies could be utilized by an international federation for intercommunication, and thus achieve economy while by co-operation securing a larger circle of federated members. . . By far the most important feature of the proposed federation would be the putting into direct touch with each other of investigators and students mutually interested in a given subject, whether it be scientific, artistic, technical, historical, geographical, biographical, genealogical, bibliographical, or commercial and industrial."

A fourth, writing of the "Index Office" (Chicago), says it will "act as a central agency for co-operative and other bibliographical undertakings and organize the bibliographical and indexing work that is being done by isolated institutions and individuals without connection with each other and without knowledge of each other's plans. In order to pave the way for this work, the office announces its readiness to collect information

about work that is being planned so as to avoid duplication. As a counterpart of this, the office will also collect information about work that is needed, but has not yet been undertaken."

So much for the testimony of what was printed for the Washington convention. There was more, of the same trend, at the sessions I attended and at others that I did not attend. The interchange of ideas with various representatives of the National Government was particularly encouraging; and it all makes one feel the timeliness of talking about the organization of sponsors for knowledge. Still more recent than the convention comes the Library Journal for June, and says in one of its editorials: "Despite all endeavors in co-operation and co-ordination, there is still immense duplication of work in the library field. A librarian, particularly in a leading library, finds himself beset with questionnaires oftentimes to the same purport as one he has answered the week before, and the result is either a seemingly discourteous attitude toward questioner No. 2 or a wasteful duplication of work in preparing the same statistics or the same answers over again, with the slightest shade of difference. . . . Most of all, as we have often pointed out, there is a very great waste in the preparation of bibliographies and reading lists, especially on topics of the time, which a library does for itself when it might make use of a very similar list already compiled or in preparation by others. A special function of an organ of the profession, like the Library Journal, should be to prevent this duplication and waste . . . We are always disposed to give space to the results of investigations which may be of interest to other possible investigators, in the hope of preventing such waste, and our columns are freely open to our readers to this end."

What do you propose to do about it? may properly be asked. One enthusiast said to me the other day that it is time to propose Washington as the city that should be looked to as the headquarters of library work in this country. I agreed with him readily and told of his sentiment to others, most of whom likewise agreed. He further suggested a certain successful publishing house as the one to afford the official channel for our all-round bibliographical and research work. I agreed with him again, and told this also to others, who to my delight seemed to be of the same mind. It seems then as though the next essential were for some one in authority to effect a meeting of these many individuals who are thinking alike, but separately,

a meeting simply for this co-ordinating purpose; and the plan for which we are in such numbers mentally and spiritually prepared will, I believe, go through of its own momentum.

Who will call the meeting? There are plenty entitled by their position to do so. The President of the American Library Association, the President of the Special Libraries Association, the Librarian of Congress, the President of the Chamber of Commerce of the United States, the Commissioner of Education, the president of any one of the large engineering societies, or any state librarian, or any head of a legislative reference bureau, or any of a dozen others that might easily and properly be named—let him give an invitation to this end, and I believe he will have many guests to entertain, and eager ones, too.

A few years ago a gas company that had been operating an electric plant wanted to sell to an electric company that wanted to buy; but neither could bring itself to make an offer. The day arrived, however, when a dissatisfied patron, who had on his own account studied the possibilities of economy should the sale be effected, invited the heads of the two companies (and as a surprise to both) to meet at his office; and when they met, he said: "Now, gentlemen, go ahead and do what you have long been wanting to do." And they did it. Likewise, the fraternity of library and reference workers of every description awaits some one to call a meeting, and the undertaking will forthwith be launched.

By way of recapitulation:

People ask multifarious questions, for which they get irresponsible answers.

Signs of the times indicate a widespread restlessness to systematize answering questions through reliable sources.

A desire for organized method has recently been expressed by several librarians at their annual meeting.

Librarians, as natural reference workers, are particularly fitted to initiate such a method.

May we not easily picture the Library of Congress as the great central library of the American people? and, with proper respect, the British Museum as the great central library of civilization? If today, however, neither Parliament nor Congress could endorse as practicable the idea of a thousand branches to these great libraries, let us have our parallel enterprise, and with such co-operation that no one will bother much whether the system is of the Government or not.



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